



19th Century Bengal Printmaking

Engraved Illustrations and Mahabharat

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Making & Makers

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Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (author of *A Grammar of Bengal Language*), was born to William Halhed and Frances Caswall on 25th May, 1751 in Westminster, England. His father William was a bank director and his mother Frances was the daughter of John Caswall (Member of Parliament for Leominster). At the age of 17 Halhed was admitted at Christ Church College, Oxford for higher education. However, even after three years of studying there when Halhed was unable to attain a single degree his father gave up. He decided to send him to India for a job under the East India Company. Since William Halhed was a close



Nathaniel Brassey Halhed

friend of Harry Verelst, due to his influence Nathaniel Halhed got a job for a writer ship post at Calcutta. Halhed got this post under Lionel Darrell who was the accountant general where he started as a Persian translator. At that time William Aldersey sent him to Kasimbazar at Murshidabad to buy and sell silk to gather practical experience.

Halhed was a very romantic person. He had quite a few affairs with women like Elizabeth Pleydell, Diana Rochfort and Henrietta Yorkae. At last, he fell in love with (Helena) Louisa Ribaut, stepdaughter of Johannes Matthias Ross who was the Dutch Factory head. During this period he learned Sanskrit and Bengali and chanced upon a meeting with Lord Warren Hastings which was a turning point in Halhed's life and marked the commencement of the most important chapter in the history of the printed form of Bengali language.

Learning the Bengali language became mandatory for the daily administrative tasks but there was no book from where Bengali could be learnt. At that time, Bengali was written down by hand on palm-leaf, *bhojpatra* and hand-made paper. There was no textual assistance for foreigners to master the language or even the basic grammar. In the year 1778, Halhed, under the assistance and leadership of Lord Warren Hastings, published 'A Grammar of Bengal Language'. With the publication of this book, the transition of Bengali language from written form to printed form was possible.



Charles Wilkins

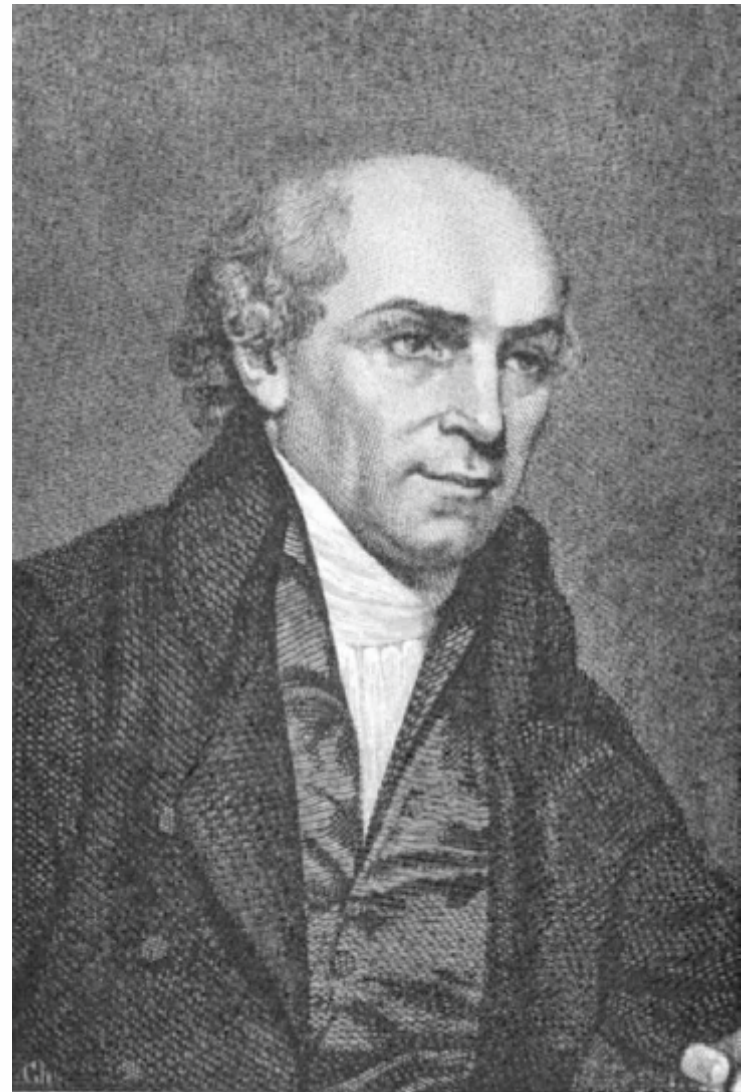
Another most important person without whom Bengali language in print form would not have materialized is Panchanan Karmakar. He was born in Tribeni, Hooghly. His forefathers were calligraphers, who used to carve inscriptions and ornamentations on copperplate, stones and weapon.

The job of printing Halhed's grammar book fell on Andrews, a Christian missionary who had a press in Hooghly. However, the toughest job during printing was while creating the Bengali letter typeface. This responsibility was given to Charles Wilkins (Charles Wilkins was an English typographer and a founder member of Asiatic Society. He stayed in India from 1780-1786. He had translated *Bhagavata Gita* to English). After a lot of searching, Wilkins met wordsmith Panchanan Karmakar. Under the supervision of Charles Wilkins, Karmakar had successfully created Bengali letter typeface and

due to these two legends 'A Grammar of Bengal Language' was published in 1778.

Bengali letters were printed extensively on paper. Initially, the Bengali letter typeface was used only for administrative works. Sir Wilkins made a press in Kolkata and Panchanan Karmakar joined the press as a typographer but did not work there for long because Charles Wilkins had to return to England. In 1808, Karmakar met British missionary William Carey and went to Serampore to create Bengali typeface in order to translate the New Testament to Bengali for Carey and stayed there. He not only made typeface in Bengali but also in 18 other languages that included Marathi, Telugu, Chinese, Japanese and Burmese etc.

Karmakar died at an early age after which his son-in-law Manohar Karmakar engaged himself in the further development of Bengali

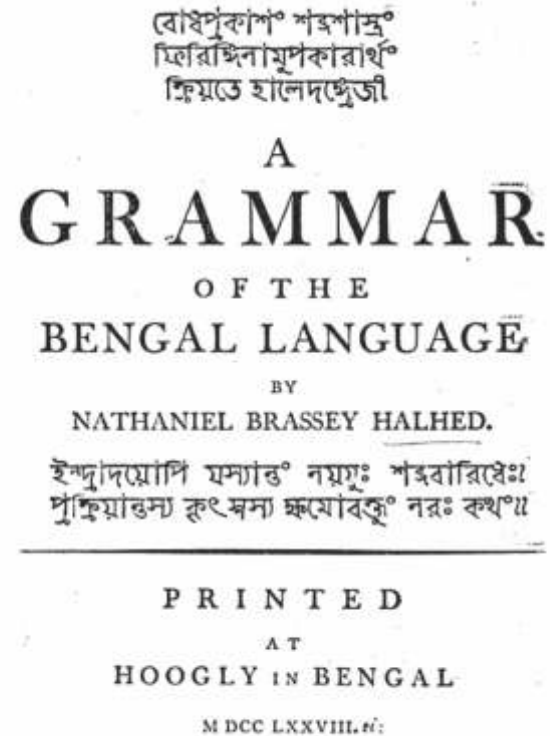


William Carey

typeface and showed excellent caliber in broadening the number of Bengali fonts.

According to the studies of Graham Shaw, in the 18th century at least 19 books were translated in Bengali and Gulam Murshid claimed that in the period spanning from 1784 to 1800 over 2000 public notices and advertisements were found that were printed in Bengali. One by one printing centers opened up in Serampore and in the areas surrounding Kolkata. The number of printing centers in 1800 to 1820 was 17 whereas in 1900 the number increased to over 350. Religious propaganda, magazines, periodicals and grammar books all were being printed in Bengali.

Books in the Bengali language were being printed extensively and the print centers flourished. However, publishers now started speculating how to make the books more attractive to readers. They felt that illustrations in books would increase the appeal and this would boost their business success. In 1816, Gangakishore Bhattacharya





Engraved by Ramchand Ray, Annadamangal, 1816

Pic. courtesy Ashit Pal

published *Annada Mangal* which was printed in the Ferris Company Press. This *Annada Mangal* was the first Bengali book to bear illustrations. The book had six engraved illustrations among which two illustrations had the inscription “Engraved by Ramchand Ray”.

According to 'Woodcut of 19th century: Artist Priyogopal Das', a Bengali text written by Asit Pal, the price of this book was Rs.4 which was quite expensive during that time. In those times, printing one engraved illustration cost one gold coin. Gangakishore had spent 6 gold coins for printing the engraved illustrations in his book. Gangakishore had gone to these lengths to engage the readers not only in the text but also to give them a visual satisfaction. As per Asit Pal's research, the arrangement and designing of the book was done by artists of the Garanata area. This book and its illustrations have become an integral part of the glorious story of Bengali illustrated books.

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Johan Gutenberg Printing Press was opened in 1436 which brought a turning point in history. In 1476, William Caxton introduced printing press in England. After almost 300 years came Charles Wilkins came to India who was named "Caxton of India"; as he was the pioneer of the print form of Bengali alphabet. Though Bengali letters came to printed form a bit late, within a very short time in the 19th century numerous books were printed in Bengali language. The amount of illustrations in books kept increasing. The question arises here that who were the makers of these illustrations in the books. And what other kinds of illustrations were done. As per historical evidence, the size of the books was not that big and the illustrations were not printed alongside the writing. All illustrations were printed on a single page which was bound to the

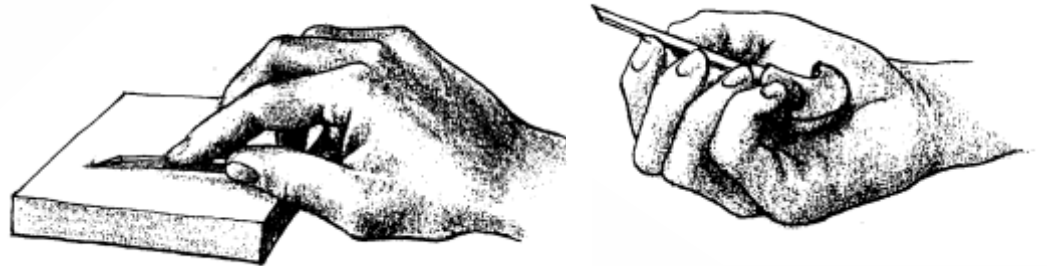
appropriate section of the book, separately. The pictures were engraved on wood and then that print was taken and inserted in the book. To create these ornamentations or inscriptions the printing presses used to have artists of their own and if not, freelance artists were consigned for this job. In the early 19th century, mainly goldsmiths were hired to design and execute the wood engraving for illustrations and the characters and figures were miniature-like from which we can infer that this style of engraving was inspired from the Indian miniature style of paintings.

For fine wood engraving the most suitable wood is hard thick box wood which was usually imported from America or the orient. Box wood is generally a common name of "buxus"



শ্রীমাধবচন্দ্র দাসেণ ক্ষোদিত• শ্রীরাগ

Engraved by Madhab Ch. Das, Sangeet Taranga, 1818



Tools used for wood engraving

genus of about 70 species in the family of buxaceae. The specialty of this wood is that it does not get bent with time. In English speaking countries it is called Box wood (Box wood is the cross-section of the wood used for the wood engraving. Artists engraved ornamentations on this type of wood by differently shaped cutting tools. The rule of engraving was the length of the carver should not exceed 11 c.m. as a longer instrument is hard to guide with the fingers. This tool was made from high quality well-tempered steel and contained a mushroom shaped wooden holder.

Artists had to know the specific holding position to engrave properly. The blades were available in all kinds

of shapes and sizes so that engravings could be done in all sizes. The dexterity of engravers lay in their ability to inscribe on the tiniest spaces with their magnifying glass.

Kolkata's Battala (today's Chitpur and Garanhata areas adjacent to Rabindra Sarani) was the birth place of print making from wood engravings. According to the content of books, publishers or printers placed orders to an independent artist or to an established block maker company for illustration. In most cases we have not been able to know the identity of these engravers whereas in other cases the name of the company has been mentioned but not the name of the artist. And in rare cases, the name of the engraver has been mentioned near the illustration. It can be inferred from this that behind the sale of a book not only the identity of the author was important but also that of the engravers.

The engravings by the few following popular artists increased the acceptability of the books to buyers. Some of them were Nityalal Dutta (N.L.D), Madhab Chandra Das, Priyogopal Das, Nafarchandra Bandyopadhyay (N.C.B), Hiralal Karmakar, Ramchand Ray and Ramdhan Swarnakar. Though their illustrated artworks were used for commercial purposes, the skillfulness and innovative streaks in these artists had acquired a place in the printmaking history of Bengal.



বিচার বিবাহ ও স্ত্রীর উপস্থিতি ।

Engraved by Hiralala Karmakar, Bharat Ch. Ray Gunakar Granthabali, Dey Brothers

চামেলি ও গোলাপসুন্দরীর ফুলখেলা।



Engraved by Priogopal

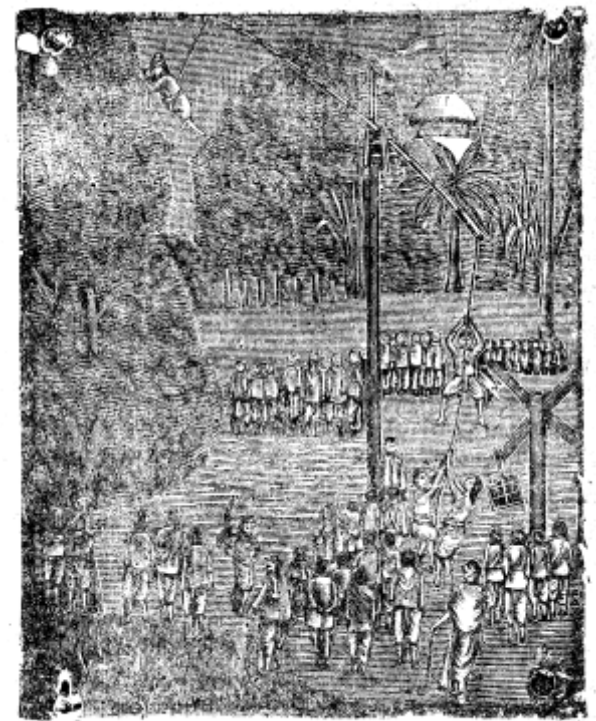
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কুন্তকর্ণের যুদ্ধ ও পতন ।

Engraved by Kartik Ch. Basak





Panjika (Bengali almanac) wood engraving by anonymous artists

৩০শে চৈত্র শনিবার চড়ক পূজা।

The birth place of art in Kolkata was Government Art School in Bowbazar where initially commercial art training was conducted but later it became the practicing space for fine art. Artists had quickly adapted their expression of creative skills with the advancing technology in this major journey of the transition from commercial art to fine arts. They had developed their signature engraving style rather than be limited at Indian miniature style influences.

A large portion in this extensive history of engraving illustrations in Bengali books is occupied by Mahabharat illustrations. Before we commence discussion on this subject it would be mandatory to mention two very reputable persons i.e. Kaliprasanna Singha and Bardhaman Maharaja Mahtab Chandra Bahadur.

Mahabharat was written in Bengali in the poetic form first by Kashiram Das. During the end period of 19th century there grew a dire need for a Mahabharat written in Bengali and in prose form. Kaliprasanna Singha had translated a portion of Mahabharat and shown it to Harachandra Ghosh and was planning to translate the rest of it too. He was 18 years old then. Iswhar Chandra Vidyasagar's Mahabharat was already being published episodically in the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*.



Kaliprasanna Singha



Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar

However, when he heard that Kaliprasanna Singha was attempting to translate Mahabharat in Bengali in the prose form he appreciated Kaliprasanna's enthusiasm and left this task up to him. Not only this, Vidyasagar hired and appointed some erudite scholars to help Kaliprasanna with this work. In the year 1780 of Saka era (1858), with the assistance of 7 scholars Kaliprasanna completed translating Mahabharat and published after 8 years of toil and dedication. This arduous task was completed at his house named '*Saraswataashram*' and '*Purana Sangrahalaya*'. He had dedicated this book to Queen Victoria and had distributed the copies for free. This feat of Kaliprasanna was publicized in an advertisement that was printed in the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*.

The other important publisher of the translated prose version of Mahabharat was Maharaja Mahtab Chandra Bahadur of Bardhaman. He was adopted by Maharaja Tejash Chandra Bahadur in the 1834. Mahtab Chandra Bahadur was not satisfied with Kashiram Das's version of Mahabharat. It was then that Pandit Sri Tarakanath Tattwaratna gave the permission of translating the Mahabharat in Bengali and in prose form and the venture started in the Bengali year 1265. The work of translation was started by keeping some similarities with the Mahabharat version published by the Asiatic Society. However, after some of the work had progressed it turned out that there were no similarities between the versions of Mahabharat. After repeated corrections by several scholars the translation was finally completed by Sri

১। বর্দ্ধমানাধিপতি মহারাজাধিরাজ
মহতাব্‌চন্দ্র বাহাদুর।



Maharaja Mahtab Chandra Bahadur

Aghornath and published in 1884. But tragically six years before it was published Maharaja Mahtab Chandra Bahadur had expired. Hence this task was completed by the minister in the court of Maharaja Aftab Chandra Bahadur (Mahtab Chandra's son) i.e. Sri Lala Banabihari Kapur.

All these different translated versions of Mahabharat were published. The engraved illustrations used in these versions of the Mahabharat were some of the finest examples of the pinnacle achieved by artists in the print making history of Bengal. The total number of illustrations in Kaliprasanna's Mahabharat were 16. Out of them, 12 were done by 'P. Sett and Co. Durgeepara' and 2 were done by Tarinicharan Karmakar 'T.C.K' and other 2 are unnamed or probably by him (as per the style of engraving). In the version published by Maharaja of Bardhaman contained illustrations done by 'Artist Press'. Although none of these illustrations mention the name of the artist but it is evident that they were very skilful.

Dey Brothers published Kashiram Das's poetic form of Mahabharat and the illustrations in this bore the name of the artist. These illustrations were done by Nafarchandra Bandhyopadhyay. He had engraved his initials i.e. 'N.C.B'. The timeline of these illustrations was 1872-1877 as mentioned on the illustrations. Besides these, few other versions of Bengali Mahabharat and Gita were published. Among them fall the publications by Hindu Press, '*Srimadbhagavata*' published by Sri Arunoday Ray in the Bengali year 1307 (1900) from Bangabasi Steam Machine Press and another

সোভিয় নিকট ঋষিগণের ভারত-শ্রবণ ।



একথা বহুদিনের কথা। বহু বছর আগে বলতে হইবে। এখানেই আছেন, ইংল্যান্ডের লেটমস্‌বর্ষ-খুব পোখোণীকী পোখী অতি দিলীপ জায়ে তখন অমুখিত হইলেন। বৈদ্যনাথবাবারী বসিল। বীহাকে অজ্ঞাতের সেখা অজ্ঞাতেরী কথা গ্রন্থ কবিতার নিমিত্ত বীহার উপস্থিতি হইলেন। আশিগর্ভ। ১ পূর্বা।

দ্রোণদীর কেশাকর্ষণ ।



স্বাভাবিকভাবে বিদ্যুৎকৃত সোমের অক্সিজেনের সমুদায় অক্সিজেনই প্রাণের দ্বারা ব্যবহৃত হয়। অক্সিজেনের অভাবে প্রাণের জীবন কাল শেষ হয়। অক্সিজেনের অভাবে প্রাণের জীবন কাল শেষ হয়। অক্সিজেনের অভাবে প্রাণের জীবন কাল শেষ হয়।

দুঃশাসনের রক্তপান ।



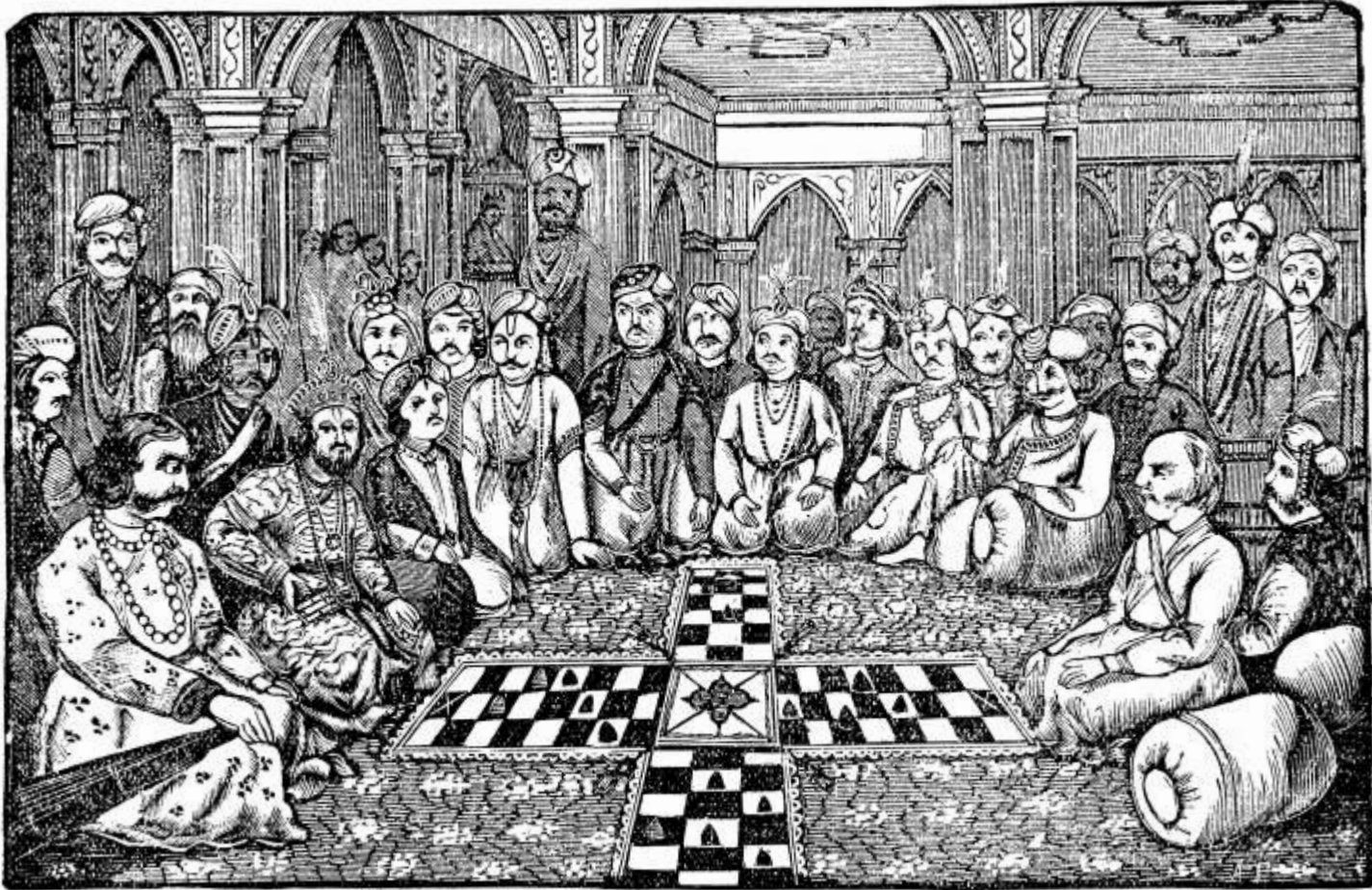
“কোনদান হুঁকোবর সোৎসুক নকরে কবকাল হুঁশানকরে নিরীক্ষণ করত আপনাব গতিজ্ঞা সত্তা করিবার মানসে শিতাবার আশি মনুজত করিয়া কাম্বিত কামবরে তাঁহার উপর পূর্ণক বক্ষনর বিধি করিয়া উপস্থাপন করিতেন।”—তর্কপার্ব ৩৩০ পৃষ্ঠা।

দুর্য্যোধনের উরু-ভঙ্গ ।



জাহাঙ্গির সিংহর পূর্বক দুর্ভাগ্যবশত উভয় লক্ষ্য কথিত বহাযোগে গা মিথেন করিলেন। জাহাঙ্গিরের সেই ব্যক্তিত্ব জীবন গা দুর্ভাগ্য-
বশত সত্যক জাহাঙ্গির জয় কাশা বীহাৎ হুজুরে গাতিত করিল। শস্যপূর্ণ ২১০ পূর্ণ।

৪। যুধিষ্ঠিরের পাশাখেলা।



শকুনি কহিল, তুমি পঞ্চালনন্দিনী কৃষ্ণাকে পণ রাখ, তাহার দ্বারা আপনাকে পুনর্ব্বার জয় করিয়া লও। যুধিষ্ঠির কহিলেন, লক্ষ্মীকপিনী পঞ্চালীর দ্বারা তোমার সহিত ক্রীড়া করিতেছি। ২৬২ পৃষ্ঠা (সভাপর্ব্ব)।

Illustrations used in Mahabharat published by Bardhaman Maharaja

৩। কৃষ্ণার্জুন-সংবাদ—শ্রীমদ্ভগবদ্গীতা ।



অর্জুন কাহলেন, হে মধুসূদন আমি পূজনীয় ভীষ্ম ও দ্রোণের সহিত সংগ্রামে অস্ত্রদ্বারা বিরূপে প্রতিযুদ্ধ করিব ?—

(ভীষ্মপর্ব ৮৪৭ পৃষ্ঠা।)

Illustrations used in Mahabharat published
by Bardhaman Maharaja

edition of the same book '*Srimadbhagavata*' by Sri Natabar Chakraborty in the Bengali year 1315 (1908) from Bangabasi Electro-machine Press. Also '*Maharshi Krishnadwayipayan Praneeta Mahabharat*' was published from Bangabasi Electro-machine Press, Mahabharat by publisher Sri Arunadoy Singha and Bhattapalli resident Pandit *Srijukto Panchanan Tarkaratna's* composition of '*Srimadbhagavata*' (1900).

In all of these books illustrations were taken from wood blocks and printed. Later copper plates were also used to print the exact same illustrations in Mahabharat books. Printing illustrations from copper blocks was easier. Hence more illustrated books were printed in this method than the ones made from wood blocks. This method started from the last part of 19th century. However, with time these methods of printing books with engraved illustrations were lost in oblivion as more advanced printing techniques developed in the then market.

There is quite an interesting story revolving around the two aforementioned versions of Mahabharat printed at the Bangabasi Press Co. The first book was printed in the steam machine press and the second one was printed in the electronic machine press. In the version printed in the steam machine press one of the illustrations labeled '*Suruchir Tirashkar*' it can be noticed that the engraved wood block from which the print had been taken was broken from the middle. The same block was used when



Engraved by Nafar Ch. Biswas, 1872



ঘটোৎকচের মায়া-সৈন্য—যুদ্ধযাত্রা

Mahabharat was printed in the electro machine press but at that time one of the broken pieces was missing. Nevertheless the illustration was done with the rest of the broken piece. We can infer from this that printing and engraving were done by separate establishments. Also it is clear that there was a serious scarcity of deft artists by the time electro machine press was developed since the Bangabasi Press did not consign an artist to make a new wood engraving of '*Suruchir Tirashkar*'. They used the old one with the remaining broken piece though it gave an incomplete result. Perhaps they did not want an imperfect illustration in their book. Therefore it is clear that there were hardly any quality wood engravers left in Bengal during that time. Because the method of printing color illustrations through half-tone blocks had started and it was initiated by Upendrakishore Roy Chowdhury. However, it took quite an amount of time for color illustrations to establish a place in the printmaking market. The cost of color printing was much more expensive than the black and white prints from wood blocks.

The relevance and popularity of engraved illustrations decreased with the advancement of technology. But the surviving products of this art form still astonish and remind us about the apex reached by Bengal artists who left a mark in the history of Indian art.

৮। ধ্রুবকে সুরুচির তিরস্কার।



ঐবকে সুরুচির তিরস্কার।



৪র্থ স্কন্ধ—১৭৬ পৃষ্ঠা।

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জীয়ের নিকট যুধিষ্ঠিরাতির ধর্মবিষয়ক উপদেশ শ্রবণ। শান্তিপর্ক ;—(১০৪ পৃষ্ঠা ।)

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